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Capture of U.S. Vessel and Crew Points Up Red Influence in Somalia

STATINTL

A PRIVATELY registered U.S. vessel, its captain, and four American crewmen have been captives of the pro-Soviet Somali Republic in East Africa the past two months without official protest from Washington — a strange state of affairs reflecting steadily rising Russian influence in East Africa and dangerous new power realities below the Red Sea.

The *Midnight Sun*, a 125-foot craft bristling with sophisticated scientific equipment, was seized by a Somali gunboat outside the port of Chisimaio on June 25. Although no charges have been lodged against crew members, Somali authorities have suggested that the *Midnight Sun* is really a U.S. spy ship engaging in communications intelligence.

That charge has been repeatedly denied by U.S. officials to the left-wing military government in the Somali capital of Mogadiscio. Nevertheless, it is partly for reasons of intelligence that Washington has raised no public furor over the incident.

Fearful that angry protests would break U.S.-Somali diplomatic relations and deprive the U.S. of a listening post for burgeoning Soviet activities in East Africa, the State Department has been working quietly to free the Americans, with hopes now high for a quick release.

But the Somali regime's sensitivity to snooping by the 36-man American diplomatic mission probably is the cause for the *Midnight Sun*'s seizure. On May 13, the Somali government expelled five members of the U.S. mission for allegedly interfering in internal Somali affairs. On July 2, the Cairo newspaper *Al Ahram* said three of them are CIA agents, a charge neither con-



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firmed nor denied by Washington.

Looming behind this African cloak and dagger is a harsh reality: The painstaking economic and political penetration of Africa by the Soviet Union while the U.S. retrenches world-wide under the spell of neo-isolationism and an empty federal treasury.

The Somali Republic is a case in point. Not long ago, State Department officials were extolling the little African country as a showcase of democracy. All that changed last October when the U.S.-dominated national police were outmaneuvered by the Soviet-dominated army, which seized power in a coup. As Russian influence expanded, U.S. influence declined. U.S.-Somali relations steadily worsened, leading to curtailment of U.S. aid.

That set the stage for the seizure of the *Midnight Sun*. Registered as the property of Guzzetta Offshore Marine Service, Inc., Berwick, La., the small ship was leased to Geophysical Services, Inc., Dallas, Texas. According to company officials, it was bound from Bahrain in the Persian Gulf around Africa's Cape of Good Hope to the U.S. Gulf Coast.

ONCE THERE, according to its owners, the *Midnight Sun* was to use its underwater geophysical equipment to search for oil and minerals. The company says none of the eight-man crew — the five Americans and three

citizens of Singapore — is capable of handling the equipment.

The company's version of the incident has the ship taking a sighting on a Somali lighthouse in rough weather and coming close to shore, where it was apprehended by the Somali coast guard and charged with violating Somali waters, failing to fly a flag, and trying to evade the Somali gunboat.

Since then, the five Americans—Capt. Helmut Leluv, Steve Romanchuck, Terry Vasseru, S. A. Wilson, and Evald Vaaks—have been held without charge in a hotel in Chisimaio. The Somalis, hinting of espionage, have been asking U.S. diplomats suggestively: if this isn't your ship and your agents, why are you so worried about them?

Walking on eggs, American diplomats have tried to spring the *Midnight Sun* without breaking diplomatic relations and giving the Soviets the completely free hand they want in the Somali Republic. After two frustrating months, it began to appear this week that the *Midnight Sun* might soon be released.

But far from easing this country's worsening problems in East Africa, it only underlines them. For example, the huge U.S. communications intelligence station at Asmara in the Eritrean region of Ethiopia, which has some 1,500 U.S. military, is coming under increasing pressures, certain to worsen as Soviet influence in the key East African target area also increases. It is endangered on one hand by Eritrea's independence movement against Ethiopia, abetted by the Soviet Union, and on the other by Sovietized Somali. When real trouble comes to Asmara, the affair of the *Midnight Sun* will look like a most innocuous prelude.

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